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AUTHOR McNergney, Robert F.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Educational researchers and journalists fail to communicate with one another. Educators fear being viewed as hungry for headlines, shallow, and opportunistic, while reporters dislike being bombarded with press releases. In fact, both researchers and journalists are capable of writing dynamically and intelligently about social problems for large numbers of readers. The problems with reporting social science research in the mass media are that: (1) findings are contingent; (2) similar studies may produce conflicting findings; (3) many reported studies are not legitimate research; and (4) what journalists choose to report may be neither valid nor important science. Communication between researchers and reporters could be improved if journal editors routinely sent copies of their publications to newspapers and if journalists devoted more attention to the educational community. Those who cover education can teach the public that educational research is a promising method for seeking solutions to social problems and more generally that education is a field of intellectual consequence which is worthy of study. (SG)

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Educational Research, Policy, and Practice: The Role of the Press

Robert F. McNergney and Daniel P. Hallahan
Commonwealth Center for the Education of Teachers
University of Virginia

Clayton E. Keller
University of Minnesota, Duluth

E. Paula Crowley
Illinois State University

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Educational researchers and journalists have a lot in common but most fail to realize it; they do not communicate often enough to know what they share with one another or how their roles differ. This situation is lamentable because reporters and researchers might help each other make the public debate about educational issues truly educational. In this paper we consider why the role of the press is so important in educational policy and practice and why communication between researchers and journalists has been so limited. We also suggest how this communication might be strengthened.

Why Is Communication So Important?

Who cares if educational researchers and journalists fail to communicate with one another? Many researchers would argue that the less communication, the better; for they perceive serious risks in discussing their work, or having someone else discuss it, in the popular press. Some avoid the media because they believe that too little is known about a topic to permit widespread application (McCall and Stocking, 1982). For others there are the fears of research "being taken out of context," "being over-simplified and thus

distorted," and "damaging one's credibility" in the community of scholars by appearing to be (a) hungry for headlines, (b) shallow, and/or (c) opportunistic. All too often scholars echo the sentiments of Andy Porter, Director of the Wisconsin Education Research Center, who observed at a meeting in San Francisco this spring, that the only people who really care about seeing researchers' names or their work mentioned in the newspapers are researchers' mothers.

Despite some notable exceptions, journalists do not seem particularly eager to pursue stories that either emanate from or are grounded in social science research in general and educational research in particular.[1] They are more interested in topics relating to events in the news ("news pegs") and topics having wide reader appeal, that is, topics that are not boring. Nelkin (1987) argues that in the case of scientific research, journalists are attracted to the controversial, the counter-intuitive, and the breakthroughs. The same may be true for education writers, but their task is probably even more difficult. Although educational research results are long on the controversial, they are woefully

short on the counter-intuitive and largely devoid of breakthroughs.

Journalists, either innately or by virtue of their training and experience, are wary of being used. This may be one reason they scorn press releases that tout the importance of a particular research study. One AP reporter described the sensation of being bombarded by press releases as having to contend with "mosquitos" (Weiss and Singer, 1988). When possible stories come to them via incoming mail, reporters interviewed by Weiss and her colleagues gave these reasons for rejecting items: "space limitations, not broad enough appeal to readers, not a hot topic, too academic, not news, too public-relations oriented, too specialized." (p.121) They also rejected items when they did not know the source or considered it unreliable or self-interested and commercial. The ethic is to get a story not to be handed one.

Moreover, if reporters were directed to ferret out stories from the world of educational research, they would likely founder in a sea of paper. Unlike science writers, they have no highly credible equivalent to the New England

Journal of Medicine to turn to for news of important developments in the laboratories of teaching and learning.[2]

Reasons for the poor communication between journalists and researchers inevitably sound like excuses. What matters is writing dynamically and intelligibly about social problems for large numbers of readers--the kind of writing both researchers and journalists are capable of producing. To do so, as a vanishing breed of publicists have done, Jacoby (1987) argues, is to celebrate public life.

> Intellectuals who write with vigor and clarity may be as scarce as low rents in New York or San Francisco. Raised in city streets and cafes before the age of massive universities, "last" generation intellectuals wrote for the educated reader. They have been supplanted by high-tech intellectuals, consultants and professors--anonymous souls, who may be competent, and more than competent, but who do not enrich public life. (p. x)

The point, of course, is that good writing made available to many serves not only the writer but society as a whole.

As a recent study of young people's reading habits indicates, the opportunity to serve society in this fashion

may be greater than we think. An analysis of the reading practices of our Nation's 21-25 year olds--commissioned by the Education Writers Association in cooperation with the Literacy Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors--obviates the importance of communicating to young people via newspapers (Kirsch, Youngblut, & Rock, 1988). Among other things, the investigators concluded:

> - The overwhelming majority (some 90 percent) of young adults reported reading a newspaper on a regular basis, at least once a week, with 45 percent reading a newspaper on a daily basis. Only 2 percent reported never reading a newspaper.
> - Over 80 percent of the 21- to 25-year olds reported that they read either editorials, international, national, state and/or financial news... (Kirsch et al., 1988, pp. i-ii)

The more than 1,600 daily newspapers reaching nearly 63 million people hold incredible potential for educating the public. The well crafted stories about education that appear in these newspapers and that are read by young people are a capital investment in our future.

What is the Nature of the Communication Problem?

Communication between researchers and reporters has probably not been so bad as H. L. Mencken, the curmudgeonly journalist of yesteryear, would think, or so benevolent as Walter Cronkite, the man with whom we shared our first starry-eyed steps on the moon, would hope for. Of those social scientists who were cited in the media and interviewed by Weiss and Singer (1988) about 85 percent thought stories about their work were accurate, 80 percent thought the emphasis was correct, and fewer than 30 percent thought important elements of their work had been left out. In general, however, most social scientists are much less enthusiastic with reporting.

According to Weiss and Singer (1988) there are four problems with reporting social science research in the mass media:

1. Social science findings are partial and contingent. But in the mass media, these contingencies are too often ignored.
2. Because of the partial and contingent nature of results, two studies may report conflicting findings

or come to different conclusions on the basis of the same findings. [When this happened] Either the findings were presented as discrete, disconnected bits, with no reference to the conflicting research; this was the more common practice. Or else discrepant findings were cited, but with no effort to reconcile the discrepancy...

3. An unknown proportion of so-called studies reported in the news media do not constitute legitimate research at all: for example, so-called surveys of a magazine's readers, based on responses by self-selected subscribers; or phone-ins to telephone numbers sponsored by television networks...

4. The social science research reported in the media is often chosen for its obvious reader relevance or dramatic value. But what is interesting to readers and viewers is not necessarily either good science, in the sense of providing valid or reliable knowledge, or important science, in the sense of making a significant contribution to knowledge about social life. (1988, pp. 255-257)

Weiss and Singer were concerned with social science research broadly defined, but the story for educational research may not be much different. We conducted a content analysis of The New York Times for a one-year period--September 1, 1986 through August 31, 1987 looking for clues to reporters' use of educational research in their writing. We selected The Times because it is national in scope and is commonly recognized in the journalistic profession as one of the most highly regarded newspapers. Indeed, our casual observation is that its coverage of educational issues appears second to none.

Insert Table 1 about here

On at least two counts the results highlight the gap between education journalists and researchers. First, whereas scholars believe the most appropriate outlets for their research are journals and professional conferences, The Times journalists rarely referred to these sources. Instead, they looked to reports issued by prestigious "blue-ribbon" committees backed by powerful individuals or groups (e.g., governors, Congress, and large, well-endowed private foundations) and to government (federal, state, foreign) for their sources of information. Most likely, these were deemed to be "newsworthy" in the sense that they were often released

Table 1

Source and Type of Research Contained in The New York Times (September 1, 1986 - August 31, 1987)

Source	Frequency
U.S. Government Agency	46
University	14
State Government Agency	13
Private Foundation	12
Professional Organization	10
Foreign Government	5
Private Research Organization	4
Journal	2
Professional Conference	1
Other	12
No Reference	8
TOTAL	127

Type	Frequency
Demographic/Survey	58
Report from Blue-Ribbon Committee	43
Experimental/Quasi-Experimental	26
TOTAL	127

for public consumption from respectable groups and done so with great fanfare. Only two of the 127 studies Times reporters cited came from scholarly journals. And the references to the two studies--one in Pediatrics and one in a 1981 issue of the Journal of Drug Issues--are not representative of research currently published by educational researchers.

Second, although the research community values research using sophisticated research designs, only 26 of the 127 Times studies could be classified as experimental or quasi-experimental, and nine of these were contained in one article comparing the Japanese and American educational systems. The type of research most often cited by The Times was the survey, a low-inference methodology that rarely makes it onto the pages of professional journals.

These findings are not an indictment of the Times. They simply reflect, we believe with a reasonable degree of accuracy, the place of educational research in one major newspaper. We would be surprised if the situation were different in other major newspapers.

Some would argue that there is so little to write about that newspapers give educational research the kind of coverage it deserves, maybe better. As Checker Finn (1988), Assistant Secretary for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement and Counselor to the Secretary in the Reagan

administration, reflecting on the state of educational research and what ails it, said: "To put it simply, our labors haven't produced enough findings that Americans can use or even see the use of." (p. 5) It is important to note, however, this perception did little to dampen his enthusiasm for publishing several books in the "What Works" series, all supposedly derived in some fashion from educational research results.[3]

When journalists use educational research in their writing it is difficult to demystify it for readers who are not educational experts. There is no commonly recognized set of principles to guide this kind of writing. It seems as much art as science, or part pedestrian craft and part brilliant social-psychological commentary. As Wells (1986) pointed out, journalists are not really prepared to find or interpret research. Even if they were, such stories are not typically the stuff of which journalistic fame is made.

Toward Improved Communication

There are two actions that might be taken immediately to improve communication between educational researchers and journalists.

1. Editors of the top five or six education journals should routinely send copies of their publications to the top 10 or 20 newspapers, or more, drawing attention to those articles that are especially newsworthy.[4] There is no

guarantee that newspaper editors and reporters will read the journals, but there is also no reason to expect that they will discover which journals are the best, trudge to the library to find them, and penetrate the opaque contents to reveal the newsworthy gems. Journalists must have educational research at their fingertips if they are to use it.

For journal editors this would necessitate some investigative work to find out who, if anyone, on the newspapers holds primary responsibility for covering education. In some cases--The New York Times, for example--there is an education section and a regular group of writers and editors. Other newspapers may spread the responsibility for education around different departments.

2. Journalists should become familiar figures in the educational research community. They can do this a number of ways, but one of the best would be to cover meetings of educational researchers. This would lead them to people in universities, labs, centers, and elsewhere who, in turn, would lead them to others with special interests in particular areas. A few key people, like some of the journal editors or association officers might be sufficiently adroit to guide journalists through the maze that is the research community in a way that a return visit would be assured. But journalists should work at finding out what is happening, and

educational researchers should work at making worthwhile work accessible to the media.

Does this mean the educational research community should establish a public relations organization much like the American Psychological Association? Probably not. Such a move would undoubtedly be interpreted by the press as self-serving, and rightly so. Like other bureaucratic organizations a public relations arm of the American Educational Research Association, for example, would probably fall prey to forces of institutionalization; that is, once established it would need to justify its existence.

It is premature, of course, to suggest this, but instead of a regular public relations organization for educational research it might be useful to turn this colloquium into the first in a series. Future colloquia might draw upon the knowledge of journalists, educational researchers, and policy makers to explore the best thinking about particular topics that are likely to concern the public. By concentrating on one or two topics per session it might be possible to dig deeply enough into a subject to do it justice, and at the same time meet the practical needs of reporters. This strategy might also move discussion away from concentrating on the problems of communication and provide some common tasks on which we could work.

If this were to be done it would be important to continue under the aegis of multiple sponsors, and indeed, to broaden the sponsorship. Those who have supported this particular colloquium have provided the money to make things happen. But more important in the long run, they may have shown us how to build a politically catholic organization that might win and maintain public trust.

Conclusion

So what do educational researchers and journalists have in common besides an abiding sense of skepticism? The answer is so obvious that we overlook it: they are both teachers driven by a moral code that values truth above all else.

A few great writers--among them Walter Lippman--have shown us that to report is to teach. If, as Ronald Steel (1980) so correctly observed, Lippman was "a teacher rather than a preacher," in Lippman's own eyes he was also a moralist. He knew, as he once wrote, that if the moralist

> is to deserve a hearing among his fellows, he must set himself this task which is so much humbler than to command and so much more difficult than to exhort: he must seek to anticipate and to supplement the insight of his fellow men into the problems of their adjustment to reality. (p. xvi)

This task, of course, continues to challenge those of Lippman's latter-day colleagues who cover education. When

they turn their attention to the best work in the field they wield their power most propitiously. In so doing, they can teach that educational research is an instrument of social utility, that is, a promising method for seeking solutions to some of our most intractable educational problems. But more subtly they can also teach that education is a field of intellectual consequence--a discipline that is, in its own right, worthy of study. A few years of this kind of instruction might be measured in terms of a citizenry that recognizes and values quality in education.

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1. This spring the state of California witnessed an interesting exception to this rule when the "Conditions of Children in California" report was issued by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). Newspapers across the state gave considerable play to the PACE report and to interviews with Michael Kirst, Stanford professor who directed the study.

2. According to Nelkin (1987), NEJM achieved its unique status in part by (a) considering no manuscript that contained research results reported earlier and (b) restraining authors from publishing their results anywhere else before they appeared in the Journal. This practice has been referred to as the Inglefinger Rule after the 1968 editor Franz J. Inglefinger.

3. Nate Gage (1985) described results of a "life or death" experiment using propranolol--a drug intended to increase survival rates of men who had experienced at least one heart attack--to demonstrate the relative importance of research findings. Finding a correlation of .045 with prevention of heart attack, researchers halted their study for ethical reasons, arguing that to deny other potential heart attack victims the benefit of this "strong" treatment was unjustiable. The result was front-page news in the New York Times and the Boston Globe and led to a cover story in Time (March 26, 1984). An article in Science (Kolata, 1984) held that the results

would 'affect profoundly the practice of medicine in this country' (p. 380). Such a correlation coefficient is quite modest compared to those documented between certain teaching processes and student learning, which may range between .2 and .5.

The point is that correlations or differences do not have to be large to be important. As Gage argues, "In education we may not be influencing life or death. But we may be influencing dropout rates, literacy, placement in special classes, love of learning, self-esteem, or a holistic ability to integrate many facts and concepts in a complex way. And independent variables in research on teaching may be no more expensive per student than the drugs used in the medical experiments that are taken so seriously." (p. 14)

4. What editors consider newsworthy may not, of course, appeal to editors in the popular press. But some studies are unusually compelling for variety of reasons. For example, one of us edits a journal called Exceptionality in which a study will be reported in January on the frightening problem of AIDS in infants and the educational implications of this tragedy.